

THE EARLY RECEPTION OF GEORG BRANDES IN GERMANY AND FRANCE. A COMPARATIVE STUDY

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ABSTRACT

The publication of *Emigrant Literature*, the first volume of *Main Currents in Nineteenth Century Literature* (1872–1890), constituted Georg Brandes' breakthrough work and the beginning of his career as a European literary critic. However, the work was very differently received in the two major literary cultures of the time, Germany and France. In the German press, Brandes was saluted as a cultural reformer and icebreaker of literary modernity, "a good European and cultural missionary", as Friedrich Nietzsche called him in a letter from 1887, whereas French critics reacted with much greater skepticism to Brandes' work. This situation was especially annoying to Brandes as he regarded French literary and intellectual culture as superior to any other culture of the world and more than anything else he longed for recognition from the French literati. The uneven distribution of critical acclaim was a paradox that also affected Brandes' self-understanding and position as a critic. The following article will examine this tension by providing a comparative study of the reception of *Emigrant Literature* in Germany and France from 1872 to 1893.

Keywords: Georg Brandes; *Main Currents*; *Emigrant Literature*; comparative literature; intellectual history; Modern Breakthrough; Scandinavia; Germany; France

The publication of *Emigrant Literature* in 1872, the first volume of lectures composing *Main Currents in Nineteenth Century Literature* (1872–1890) was a decisive event in Georg Brandes' career as literary critic and public intellectual. In the local context of Denmark in 1872, *Emigrant Literature* produced a public scandal that would prevent Brandes from pursuing a planned career as a university professor in aesthetics at the University of Copenhagen. As a result, he had to find himself an alternative way of living as an independent journalist and literary critic writing for the emergent literary market in Germany.

In its totality, *Main Currents* is an ambitiously designed comparative history of the major lines of development in nineteenth-century European literature and identity. It chronicles how the worldly ideals of freedom of the French Revolution of 1789 turned into their opposites, thus leading to European Romanticism, Catholic renaissance, and

Empire, and ultimately how reason and freethinking overcame this reaction in a new movement leading onward toward the bourgeois revolutions of 1848. *Emigrant Literature* was the first movement – the first act – in this historical drama, which played out among the French émigré authors driven into exile by the repercussions of the French Revolution.

However, in the first series of lectures, given in Copenhagen in November-December 1871, Brandes chose to frame this project not as a piece of literary history, but rather as a cultural-political intervention: an act of rebellion directed at contemporary Danish literature and mentality, which, according to Brandes, had become mired in Romanticism and thus now found itself in a state of lethargy – blind and deaf to the liberal developments in nineteenth century European literature and politics.

Brandes' first series of lectures became a *succès de scandale* that filled up the university auditoria with a crowd of mostly young people, yet also gave Brandes a reputation of rabble-rouser and blasphemer (Juncker 1973). When the book came out in early 1872, Brandes was even faced with accusations of socialism, although there was transparently no materialist or Marxist dimension in his agenda. Yet, the controversy around his name was the reason why a majority of conservative professors in the faculty of philosophy in 1872 opposed his appointment to the vacant professorship in aesthetics, for which he was otherwise the obvious candidate (Larsen 2016). Brandes thus had to bid farewell to the prospect of a secure bourgeois livelihood as a state-appointed professor. Furthermore, he was banned from leading Danish newspapers and could no longer make his living as a literary and theater critic in his home country. This state of affairs compelled him to bed on the German literary market and to work as an independent journalist in the German press, while also settling down in Berlin for a longer period from 1877 to 1883 (Sørensen 1980; Bohnen 2005; Allen 2010).

“[A] victory in Germany, and you will feel yourself on top of the world at home”, Henrik Ibsen wrote encouragingly in a letter to Brandes in July 1872 (Brandes 1939: 216). Contrary to the deadlock situation in Denmark, the German public and literary market offered a favorable soil for Brandes' activities and development as a writer, critic and public intellectual. In Germany, the six volumes of *Main Currents* came out in several translations and competing editions, while also a number of books and essays were written especially for the German public. Through this activity, Brandes was also able to secure, over the following decade, the status of a leading European literary critic and cosmopolitan mediator between European literatures – a “guter Europäer und Cultur-Missionär” [a good European and cultural missionary], as Friedrich Nietzsche called him in a private letter of 1887 (Brandes 1966: 441).

Georg Brandes' position as a European literary critic was thus created essentially on the German literary market. However, the victory in Germany did not make him feel completely on top of the world, as Ibsen had suggested. More than anything else, he longed for dissemination and recognition in France as he considered French literary and intellectual culture as superior to any other culture in the world. This situation created a tension or double bind in Brandes' self-understanding and position as a critic and cosmopolitan intellectual. The following article will examine this tension by providing a comparative study of the early reception of *Main Currents* in Germany and France from 1872 to 1893. Methodologically, the study will take the form of a reception history

that will map out some of the most important actors and mediators in the early dissemination of Brandes, while focusing especially on the critical judgements and reactions to Brandes' work among German and French critics. Parts of this research have been carried out within the framework of the project "Digitale Hovedstrømninger/Digital Currents" (2016–2019), funded by the Danish Carlsberg Foundation, and some of the results are also included in another forthcoming publication (Jelsbak 2023).

A Good European – Made in Germany

When entering the German literary market Brandes had an important advocate and mediator in the translator Adolf Strodtmann. Strodtmann was the man behind the first German translation of *Emigrant Literature*, published as early as September 1872 (Brandes 1872). Strodtmann did not only contribute with a favorably disposed introduction to the German edition; he also played an important role in introducing Brandes to the German public in his 1873 book *Das geistige Leben in Dänemark* (1873) which contained a somewhat valorizing discussion of the scandal of *Emigrant Literature* in the Danish public. Thanks to Strodtmann's mediations, Brandes received the best possible introduction to the German literary market (Bruns 1977) where he was presented as the daring young freethinker who had challenged Danish orthodoxy and consequently been cut down by reactionary public opinion.

It is evident from early reviews and discussions of *Emigrant Literature* in the German press that German reviewers were well informed of the reception of the book in Denmark. In *Das Magazin für die Literatur des Auslandes* (no. 49, 1872: 640), Theodor Storm referred to Brandes' revolt against "die Versumpfung" [quagmire] of Scandinavian intellectual life and predicted that *Emigrant Literature* would acquire an epochal significance for the diffusion of European ideas of freedom and progress in the Nordic countries – "Eine bittere Medizin zwar, aber hoffentlich von heilsamen Folgen" [a bitter medicine, but hopefully with healing effects] (ibid.).

The anonymous reviewer in *Literarisches Centralblatt* similarly lauded Brandes for his uncompromising attack on Danish self-absorption and self-satisfaction. "Ein literarischer Gambetta proclamiert Brandes darin die geistige Revolution" [Like a literary Gambetta, Brandes proclaims the intellectual revolution in Denmark] (Anon. 1873: 820). The lectures were praised for their intellectual riches and elegant art of characterization, and Brandes was likened to a physician who enters a closed-up and foul-smelling sickroom, peeling back the shutters and opening the windows so that air and sunlight can enter.

Likewise, Robert Waldmüller (the pseudonym of the author and painter Charles Edouard Duboc), in *Blätter für literarische Unterhaltung* (Waldmüller 1874: 92–93), extolled Brandes as a lone fighter for freedom and progress in the Scandinavian countries: "Er hat bei diesem Kampfe die liberalen Elemente aller Nationen auf seiner Seite" [in these struggles he has the liberal elements in all nations on his side] (Waldmüller 1874: 93). Brandes was again praised for his refreshing and lively form of presentation, Waldmüller deeming *Emigrant Literature* as a work of interest to all Europe.

The three examples demonstrate the favorable conditions in Germany for a liberal thinker and cultural reformer like Brandes, and this measure of positive interest was

influential in his decision to bed on the German literary market. Thanks to Strodtmann, the subsequent volumes of *Main Currents* were published almost simultaneously in German editions (Brandes 1873, 1874, 1876), and in 1874 Brandes was retained as a staff writer for Julius Rodenberg's newly founded liberal journal *Deutsche Rundschau*. For this journal Brandes, over the course of the next 15 years, was to produce a series of important essays on European authors and cultural personalities, culminating with the long portrait of the hitherto rather unknown German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche in 1890. Brandes' publication activity in the German press also included numerous articles and reviews in more journalistic venues such as *Allgemeine Zeitung*, *Die Gegenwart* and the Austrian daily *Neue Freie Presse* (Bohnen 2005; Allen 2010).

The same year that Brandes became affiliated with *Deutsche Rundschau*, a review of the first three volumes of *Main Currents* by Friedrich Kreyssig appeared in the October-November issue. Kreyssig also celebrated the cosmopolitan ambition of the work, praising Brandes as a progressive advocate of freedom and modern science, additionally pointing to the disciplinary innovation in Brandes' methodology. As Kreyssig noted, *Main Currents* was not literary history in the traditional sense: neither biographical-genetic author portraits nor bibliographic annals nor aesthetic art criticism. "Wer also das Buch zur Hand nähme, um etwa auf eine Prüfung über Literaturgeschichte sich vorzubereiten, der ginge gewiss an die falsche Adresse" [Thus he who would take the book in hand to prepare for an exam in literary history would get lost in the trees]. In contrast, Kreyssig lauded Brandes efforts of tracing the great transformations in the "psychology" of German and French society during the period (Kreyssig 1874: 140).

When *Emigrant Literature* was issued in 1882 in a revised German second edition (Brandes 1882), there followed yet another favorable review in *Blätter für literarische Unterhaltung* by Otto Weddingen, focusing on Brandes' work as a pioneering contribution to comparative literary studies. Weddingen also emphasized Brandes' cultural-historical and psychological approach to literature as the great merit of the work: "Es ist kein Buch in dem gewöhnlichen Sinne unserer Literaturgeschichten, es ist kein Sammel-surium von Namen und Daten, sondern ein Erzeugnis, welches die Literaturen vom psychologischen Standpunkt aus betrachtet" [it is not a literary history in the conventional sense, not a medley of names and dates, but in contrast a product of the psychological observation of the literatures] (Weddingen 1882: 750).

These later reviews give witness to Brandes' rising reputation in Germany as a literary critic and cosmopolitan advocate for progressive ideas, a "cultural missionary" as Nietzsche called him. During this same period Brandes also came to play a main role in the introduction of modern Scandinavian literature and theatre to Germany. Brandes' status in the young radical literary milieu of Germany is apparent in the following character sketch by the theater critic, dramatist, and founder of the Berlin Naturalist theater *Freie Bühne* Otto Brahm, published in *Frankfurter Zeitung* on March 3, 1884, on the occasion of a staging of Henrik Ibsen's modern play *Ghosts*:

We Germans cannot look on the development of Nordic poetry without envy ... a cohesive literary movement ... which aims at the liberation of the mind from the depths of darkness ... It is with a "golden recklessness" that Ibsen and Bjørnson and the youth of Scandinavia, who have a leader in Georg Brandes, fight against the medieval oppression that

burdens the minds of these bishop-ruled countries ... When Georg Brandes some fifteen years ago awakened his countrymen by telling of the “main currents” of modern literature, a new epoch broke out; just as the classical period in our literature emanated from Lessing and Herder, this breakthrough occurred at the urging of a purely critical intellect. (Brahm 1913: 74)

Riding the Scandinavian wave and the fame of Brandes in Germany, a series of new collected editions of *Main Currents* were published in the 1890s, and thus a new round of reviews followed, in which the continued acknowledgment of Brandes as the leading critic of the Modern Breakthrough in Scandinavian literatures was blended with new critical voices. One example is Franz Mehring’s review of the collected edition of *Main Currents* in *Die neue Zeit*, in which Brandes was met with a new kind of criticism, targeting his bourgeois ideals and idealistic conception of history:

Als bürgerlicher Schriftsteller bewegt sich Brandes immer auf idealistischem Boden; er behauptet zwar gelegentlich überall ins Leben zurückzugreifen, aber die Erkenntnis, dass sich die literarische Bewegung in letzter Instanz aus der ökonomischen Entwicklung erklärt, ist ihm fremd. [As a bourgeois author Brandes treads always upon idealistic ground; sure enough he occasionally asserts that he reaches back toward life in all areas, yet the awareness that the literary movement in the end is a mirroring of economic development is alien to him].

Despite this criticism, Mehring concluded his review by praising Brandes for his lively and intellectually abundant style, which “schmeckt wie feuriger Wein, verglichen mit der faden Limonade der preussischen Literaturgeschichte” [tastes like a fiery wine when compared to the flavorless lemonade of Prussian literary history] (Mehring 1893–1894: 311).

The French Complex

It is interesting to compare the favorable German reception of *Emigrant Literature* with the work’s fate in France. Such a comparison is of particular interest not only because the book was about French literature, but also because France during this era held a status as the center of the world literary republic (Casanova 1999). Paris was the leading center of artistic and literary innovation in Europe and the world – the place from which new literary and artistic movements emanated and in which the criteria of literary quality and modernity respectively were set. For the same reasons, the French market also constituted a kind of promised land for modern Scandinavian authors like Georg Brandes, Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson or August Strindberg: the place where more than any other it was desired to have one’s texts published, staged, and evaluated by critics (Briens 2010).

Yet, the French literary market was also the one where Brandes had the greatest difficulty in entering and making a place for himself. The modest interest for Brandes’ among the French literati is witnessed also by the fact of the sluggish diffusion of *Main Currents* in France, where only of the six volumes, the fifth on *The Romantic School in France*, was published in French translation in 1902.

Emigrant Literature was otherwise well introduced in France as early as 1873, in the form of a 30-pages essay by Henri Blaze de Bury in the November issue of *Revue des deux mondes*. The essay contained no critical evaluation, but offered a congenial and gripping summary of the main ideas of *Emigrant Literature* (based on Strodtmann's German translation from 1872). The Francophone world thus had an early opportunity to become acquainted with Brandes' comparative understanding of literature and his principal idea of the main currents in nineteenth-century European literature as a dialectic interplay between the spirit of Voltaire and the spirit of Rousseau.

Nevertheless, 10 years would pass before the French public would again hear of Brandes, this time in the form of a critical profile by Arvède Barine (the pseudonym of Madame Charles Vincens) in *La Revue Blanche* (Barine 1883). This article is of particular interest in that it contains a morally grounded criticism of Brandes' vision of humanity and society in *Emigrant Literature*. Barine saw Brandes as a "sectarian" disciple of Rousseau, asserting that his temperament was carried away by his passionate struggle for natural rights and individual freedom, at the expense of "civilization" and social morality. As a counter argument to the libertarian tendencies in Brandes' agenda, Barine argued that the moral rules of conduct in a society constituted not only forces of repression but were also and essentially means of protecting people against infringement. In other words, Barine contested the democratic starting point of Brandes' radicalism, suggesting that the consequence of his struggle for the emancipation of the individual in reality would lead to a legitimization of the right of the stronger.

Despite these and other more literary-historical objections, Barine concluded by expressing her acknowledgment of Brandes' bold attempt to present a synthesis of this chaotic chapter in French literary history using the opposition between Voltaire and Rousseau. It is also evident that Brandes' work appealed to a certain form of national sentiment among French critics. At the end of the review Barine expressed her gratitude for Brandes' immense service in having demonstrated how the main currents of nineteenth-century European literature originated in France. "We are no longer pampered by these kinds of compliments," the review concluded (Barine 1883: 764).

This formulation provides a glimpse of the attitude of national defeatism that marked the public discourse in France after its defeat in the Franco-Prussian War of 1870. This attitude was also an important aspect of the relative insularity of the French literary market of the time – when compared with the open and omnivore character of the contemporary German book market, not least with regard to translations of modern Scandinavian literature.

While Brandes had gained a position as leading European critic in Germany, it was a great disappointment to him that there was only a modest interest in his works in France. This feeling of disappointment is reflected in a letter to his friend Georges Noufflard from January 26, 1888:

Je lis toujours beaucoup de Français. J'aime votre littérature plus que toute autre. J'ai écrit plus de livres sur la France que sur tout autre pays et pourtant je suis parfaitement inconnu en France. Quand j'avais écrit un seul article sur les Flamands on était prêt à mériter des statues en Flandre; tout les poètes m'envoyaient leurs œuvres, tous les journaux parlaient de moi. Quand j'ai écrit deux petits articles sur les écrivains Russes sans même savoir leur

langue, on a été tellement touché de mes connaissances qu'on m'a loué, m'a traduit, m'a fait venir. Sur la France j'ai écrit plus de volumes que je n'ai écrit d'articles sur la Russie, et on sait à peine que j'existe. Un certain Charles Simond veut me traduire; depuis deux ans il cherche en vain un éditeur, bien que Paul Bourget m'ait offert d'écrire une introduction. Cela m'attriste un peu, car une réputation n'est pas consacrée aussi longtemps que la France n'a pas dit son mot.

[I constantly read French. I love your literature more than any other. I have written more books about France than any other country, and still I am altogether unknown in France. When I had written a single article on Flemish literature, they were ready to erect a statue of me; all their poets sent me their works, all their newspapers talked about me. When I had written two short articles on Russian poets, without even knowing the language, they were so moved by knowledge of them that I was praised, translated and invited to visit. I have written more books on France than I have articles on Russia, and still the French hardly know I exist. A certain Charles Simond wants to translate me; for two years he has searched in vain for a publisher, even though Paul Bourget has for a long time promised to write an introduction. It irritates me, for the measure of an author has not been established as long as France has withheld its judgement.] (Brandes 1952: 131–12)

France did withhold its judgement until 1893, when the literary critic Jean Thorel published a comprehensive 20-page article on Brandes in *Revue de deux mondes*, written at the occasion of the newly published, collected German edition of *Die Literatur des neunzehnten Jahrhunderts in ihren Hauptströmungen*, issued by the Leipzig house Veit & Co. (1882–1892).

Thorel began his review by affirming Brandes' rising international reputation as a literary critic, and by contesting the view that French national chauvinism was the reason for the lack of interest for him in France. According to the French critic, the ignorance and lack of literary acknowledgement of Brandes in France was due essentially to the fact that Brandes was not a literary critic at all, but first and foremost a polemicist whose chief cause from the beginning had been to fight against and ultimately destroy every form of religion. Brandes' anti-clerical agenda was however of less relevance in the French context, and what the Danish critic had to say about French literature in *Emigrant Literature* did not impress Thorel. Brandes' "tiny" selection of authors and works from the period was "wholly insufficient" and all too selective to fulfill his ambition of portraying the main currents of nineteenth-century psychology (Thorel 1893: 343).

Furthermore, Thorel opposed the theoretical framework of *Main Currents* presenting nineteenth-century European literary history as a dialectic interplay between the spirit of Voltaire and the spirit of Rousseau. Thorel did not comprehend what kind of common "liberal" spirit could be attributed to the intellectual essences of Voltaire, Rousseau, Lessing, and Schiller. At the same time Thorel also pointed out a contradiction in Brandes' comparative method, which consisted on the one hand of affirming the prior lack of exchange between European national literatures, while on the other asserting that the literary works and types in the different literatures were causally connected and determinative of one another. If one wanted seriously to study the deeper and lasting influences between literatures, Thorel argued, one had to abandon the politicizing perspective on past literatures, instead going to the sources themselves. One can sense in this judgement

the new scientific standards for comparative literary criticism introduced in the decades since the first appearance of *Emigrant Literature* in 1872. Within this new field of comparative criticism a new positivistic interest in *influences* between works and authors had replaced the old romantic-idealistic doctrine of a universal spirit in history.

At the conclusion of the article, Thorel marshalled all of his weapons in order to deprive Brandes of any claim to legitimacy or originality as a literary scholar. Brandes' work was nothing other than "a long, confused and indirect defense [plaidoyer]" of political ideas that were alien to literature, and as such would have demanded a wholly different approach than that pursued in the work. From the point of view of literary history, Brandes' efforts amounted to nothing other than ephemeral compilation:

quelque bruit qui ait été fait autour de son nom et de ses livres, on s'aperçoit, le premier moment d'étonnement passé, qu'il n'y a là rien qui mérite d'arrêter l'attention plus qu'il ne convient de le faire pour une compilation, momentanément utile à cause de la masse des matériaux qui y sont rassemblés, mais que demain le premier compilateur venu pourra refaire avec plus de méthode et de clarté, ce qui rendra tout de suite inutile, – même comme compilation, – toute l'œuvre de M. Brandes.

[regardless of all the hubbub surrounding his name and his books, as soon as the initial bemusement has passed, one discovers that there is nothing in his work that deserves attention other than that it is passable as a kind of compilation, which at the moment is useful because of the great mass of material collected within it, but which tomorrow will be able to be reworked with more methodological skill and greater clarity than the initial compiler has exhibited, which will immediately render Mr. Brandes' entire work obsolete, even as a compilation.] (Thorel 1893: 358)

Thorel's severe criticism of Brandes may also be seen as part of an ongoing debate in 1890s literary France about the proper attitude to the new and foreign literary expressions and influences that had recently been introduced to the country. Like Germany, France was also witness to a Scandinavian wave that manifested itself in translations and in Parisian productions of modern Scandinavian drama by writers such as Ibsen, Bjørnson, and Strindberg (Segrestin 2010; Rogations 2016). Yet the French literary public was also capable of exhibiting an equally fervent opposition to the present "Scandophilia" or "Nordomania," articulated by nationally oriented literati and theater critics who desired to protect France's national poetics or hegemony in the world literary republic (See for instance Lemaitre 1894 and 1898). Thorel's attempt to deprive Brandes of his status as a leading European literary critic also follows this pattern.

Conclusions

In relation to the positive and empathetic reception of Brandes in Germany, it is interesting to note that it was in France that his work encountered the most engaged moral and ideological criticism. It is also noteworthy that the majority of the objections to Brandes in the French reception (such as the charges of politicizing art and disavowing religion) were the same as those he had originally bene encountered with in the Danish

public of 1872 – with the difference that French critics were able to distinguish the difference between liberalism and socialism. As was the case in Denmark after the defeat in the Danish-Prussian War of 1864, France's defeat in the Franco-Prussian War of 1871 had rendered political and literary opinion in the country more conservative and national and therefore less open and receptive to a figure like Brandes. The reason for Brandes' relative lack of resonance in France may, at least partly, be explained by aspects of international geopolitics and the crisis of French national identity in the period.

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